CREATIVE ASSEMBLAGES: ORGANISATION AND OUTPUTS OF PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH

Alex Wilkie, Department of Design, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW, UK
a.wilkie@gold.ac.uk

William Gaver, Department of Design, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW, UK
w.gaver@gold.ac.uk

Drew Hemment, ImaginationLancaster, The Roundhouse, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YW, UK
d.hemment@lancaster.ac.uk

Gabriella Giannachi, Department of Drama, University of Exeter, Thornlea, New North Road, Exeter EX4 4LA UK.
g.giannachi@exeter.ac.uk

Abstract

In this note we explore the organisation of creative, practice-led projects and the variety of research outcomes they produce, in order to question assumptions about their potential benefits.

The pursuit of practice-based research in the UK is increasingly coloured by a sustained policy preoccupation with understanding and stimulating the connections between 'creativity', industry and research in order to promote economic development. Looking to the 'creative industries' as a source of economic strength is nothing new in the UK (one need only recall the 'Cool Britannia' branding of the last decade), and reflects broader policy shifts towards economically harnessing creativity (e.g., the United Nations Creative Economy Report advocates creativity as a potential economic driver for so called developing countries) [1]. With economic prospects looking increasingly grim both nationally and within higher education in particular, however, it is no surprise that creative, practice-led research is being looked to more and more as a resource for potentially commercial benefit, and that the potential of delivering such benefits is an ever more important criterion for such work [2].

The danger of looking for commercial pay-offs from practice-based research is that it may construe the organisation and potential outcomes of such investigations too narrowly. Given that such research commonly produces a variety of technological prototypes, it is tempting to assume a linear model of technological transfer whereby basic research can reap commercial reward through application, development and diffusion as the most direct and measurable form of impact for such collaborations [3]. However, our exploration of collaborative modes suggests that forms and impacts of creative partnerships may be wider in scope and less straightforward in development than assumed [4]. The purpose of this note, then, is to explore the variety of research outcomes, or impacts, produced by creative, practice-led projects, and the organisational forms that such projects take in order to produce those outcomes, in the hope of questioning assumptions about the benefits that might properly be expected from this style of research.

Case Studies: Energy, the Environment and Practice-Led Research

In order to inform our exploration of creative, practice-led projects, we conducted a survey of interdisciplinary projects involving creative practitioners to better understand how they were organised and the types of outcomes and impacts they made. We focused on projects dealing with the energy and the environment as a methodological device for narrowing our search while providing access to a wide range of practices that are both active and topical. In choosing such practice-led collaborations we sought to expose novel mediations between technological research, energy related practices, the environment, publics and users.

The case studies we explored exhibited a wide diversity of forms in terms of disciplinary contributors, forms of collaboration, outputs and outcomes, and approaches to engagement. For instance, forms of collaboration included various groupings of university departments, large and small corporate organizations, funding agencies, government departments, galleries, museums and homes. Outcomes ranged from domestic appliances to journal articles, and from participatory workshops to Ph.D. theses. The sites of engagement range from contemporary art to consumer products and from industrial trade shows to policy intervention. Finally, the case studies revealed different ways in which publics and users were mobilised during both project development and dissemination. Moreover, our case studies often blurred the distinctions between collaborators, users, process and output. Reporting the full range of collaborations and outputs embodied by the 100+ examples we looked at is beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this discussion, then, we briefly describe three case studies, the 'Wattson' energy meter, 'ERAR-AT' environmental monitor, and the 'Static!' Project, which illustrate research configurations typical of our results.

Wattson is a consumer product that allows people to monitor their domestic electricity consumption. It was designed and is marketed by the London based product design studio DIY KYOTO. Wattson indicates energy consumption via a numerical display and by emitting one of three 'ambient' colours to signify light, medium or heavy usage. DIY KYOTO present Wattson as a device to promote and facilitate more cost-efficient electricity usage practices. Arguably, the novelty of the monitor lies in its aesthetics as an artefact that can be placed on display amid the landscape of other decorative objects within the home, rather than hidden away as a mere meter. Of relevance here is that the collaboration involved relatively few authors and stakeholders, the output was restricted to a commercial product (as opposed to, for instance, descriptions of process) and prospective users were conceived as environmentally concerned consumers rather than, for example, collaborators or discussants.

The ERAR-AT (Environmental Risk Assessment Rover) is an artwork created in 2008 by two artists, working under the name EcoArtTech. It is an apparatus that uses its own GPS coordinates to gather local risk and environmental data (for example air quality, local road traffic accident reports and current US terrorist warning levels) for video projection onto nearby surfaces. EcoArtTech articulate the device as a sustainable technology that draws attention to the persistent technoscientific failures of modernity and the ensuing technological practices and discourses of risk. It is one of a number of artworks by which EcoArtTech draw attention to issues relating to the environment. This project also involved a limited number of contributors, but in contrast to the last its output is an artwork that depends on the variety of sites within which it operates for its meaning. Consequently it encourages discussion and comment among an open-ended public rather than addressing the end-user simply as consumer.

Our final case study is the STATIC! Project, run by the Swedish Interaction Institute between 2004 and 2005.

STATIC! set out to investigate and promote awareness of energy use through the discipline of interaction design. In contrast to the previous two projects, disciplinary contributors were diverse, and there were multiple stakeholders including academic, government and commercial agencies. In addition, the project used a variety of design-led methods to encourage cooperation between designers and prospective users. Outputs of STATIC! included domestic product prototypes, such as an energy aware power cord that emits light patterns signifying varying levels of energy being used, but the project also resourced the production of postgraduate theses, symposiums, workshops and seminars, and publications.

Even these three case studies reflect a bewildering range of participants, organisational arrangements, practices, outcomes and potential impacts. In the following section, we introduce the notion of creative assemblages to help understand the possibilities for research illustrated by these projects.

Creative Assemblages

Inspired by developments within the sociology of science and technology, we draw upon the notion of *assemblage* to help us understand the interweaving of practices, technologies, institutions, authors, knowledge and issues constituting the case studies [5]. The notion of creative assemblages is useful in sensitising us to how practice-led research is heterogeneously composed, the manner in which such initiatives occupy, or territorialize, contexts of interdisciplinary knowledge, how they can be continually in the process of development, circulation and dissemination and to the assembling practices of creative practitioners in building outcomes, alliances and publics. In short, the notion allows us to appreciate and make legible a range of project forms, including not only simple collaborations producing easily articulated outcomes, but also the more sprawling, multidimensional collectives that produce a variety of seemingly less coordinated outcomes. The conjoint term creative assemblage attunes us to how creativity can be acknowledged as an effect of such assembling process rather than the residual capacities of an individual innovation author. With this in mind we have tentatively identified three models of creative assemblages:

1) Compact and closed assemblages are efforts explicitly oriented to a single outcome, a specific issue and a particular use such as product development. The organisation tends to involve relatively few participants, and crucially, this form of assemblage is characterised by protection of intellectual property and development process. The Wattson energy monitor is a case in point.

2) Compact and open assemblages: again, undertakings concentrating on a single outcome, however compact and open assemblages disclose intellectual property, technologies and processes and as such demonstrate openness. This allows the potential for a wider variety of impacts than the 'product' alone, including public participation, media attention, and potential spin-offs of the technologies themselves. The ERAR-AT typifies this model.

3) Loose and open assemblages are endeavours supported by multiple agencies, mobilizing interdisciplinary knowledge and practices, resourcing multiple outcomes and in doing so occupying diverse contexts, seeking relevance to and enrolling multiple publics, users and audiences. Such projects work to make as many connections as possible. STATIC! exemplifies the loose, emergent mode of such assemblages.

Of course, the three modes are not mutually exclusive, nor exhaustive (for instance, we suspect loose but closed assemblages occur, though we did not find examples of these). Rather, our characterisation is a heuristic allowing us to consider 'logics' of interdisciplinarity beyond accountability and transfer and to avoid linear conceptualisations of innovation.

Beyond Unitary Outcomes

Implied in the models of assemblage we suggest above is that practice-led projects can be characterised by two underlying dimensions of 'looseness' and 'openness', and moreover that these dimensions are correlated. In other words, assemblages that are relatively compact in terms of their disciplinary collaboration and goals will tend to produce outputs that are relatively closed and constrained, amenable to intellectual property protection. These are the sorts of projects that the transfer model fits well. Some of the most exciting assemblages we discovered, however, were both loose and open. They involved a dynamically shifting cast of contributors ranging from core project partners to network members and ad hoc participants, and produced outcomes ranging from prototypes on the one hand to community events, press coverage, postgraduate researchers and a research community on the other. Rather than producing a clear transfer of intellectual property for commercial gain, such projects arguably create the conditions in which intellectual property can be developed by a wide variety of people in a broad range of settings.

Clearly our report is preliminary, and in this brief note we can only highlight some of our findings. We hope to contribute, nonetheless, to a discussion about the vast range of creative collaborations that occur, the wide variety of beneficial outputs these might produce, and how the notion of creative assemblages can help us understand these benefits in ways that go beyond simplistic notions of transfer. For it is certainly the case that creative, practice-led research can produce economic as well as cultural benefits. But it is equally certain that too narrow a conception of the appropriate organisation and outputs of such research will result in its unique benefits being lost.

References and Notes

This research was undertaken as part of the Creator Project (www.creatorproject.org/).

1. United Nations, 'Creative Economy Report 2008: The challenge of assessing the creative economy towards informed policy-making', (United Nations: 2008), p. 357.

2. We have in mind here research characterised by what Gibbons et al. identify as 'Mode 2 knowledge production' involving direct relevance to a context of application, interdisciplinarity, organizational heterogeneity, non-hierarchical structure and accountability. Michael Gibbons, Camille Limoges, Helga Nowotny, Simon Schartzman, Peter Scott and Martin Trow. *The new production of knowledge* (Sage; London, 1994) p. 4.

3. Benoit Godin. "The Linear Model of Innovation: The Historical Construction of an Analytical Framework". Science Technology Human Values **31**, No. 6 (2006) pp. 639-667.

4. Andrew Barry, Georgina Born and Gisa Weszkalnys, "Logics of interdisciplinarity", Economy and Society **37**, no. 1 (February 2008), pp. 20-49.

5. For the notion of the assemblage see, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Brian Massumi, trans (London, U.K.: Continuum, 1996). For examples of how the notion has been adopted in the sociology of science and technology see, Alan Irwin and Mike Michael. *Science, social theory and public knowledge* (Open University Press; Buckingham, 2003) p 119. For its utilization within anthropology see, Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier. *Global assemblages: technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological problems* (Oxford, U.K. Blackwell, 2005).